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ABSTRACT

Children are drawn to poetry by its rhythm, rhyme, and repetition. A poetry program in the classroom can expand children's language experience, teach listening and speaking skills, and serve as a source of ideas for discussion. One very effective poetry program involves readings, discussions, practice sessions, and recitals. In the first week, a poem is read aloud several times by the teacher, and discussed. Once the class knows the poem well by ear, the poems are distributed on paper. After a month, each child prepares to present one of the poems to the class. During practice sessions prior to the recital, the teacher works with individuals or small groups on expression and phrasing. Supplementary activities include dramatizing poetry, and team contests testing knowledge of authors, titles, and content of poems. Repeated exposure to poetry is a good source of vocabulary and literary technique that can be valuable to children's prose writing and speech. Recitals can diminish fear of public speaking and instill a sense of pride in children. Children are also capable of thoughtfully discussing the serious themes in poetry. Poetry will likely be with children long after they have forgotten other skills. (A brief list of poetry anthologies is included.) (HTH)

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"Teaching Poetry in Elementary School"

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Teaching Poetry in Elementary School

Poetry is powerful magic. Children are drawn to it by its rhythm, repetitions and rhyme, its imagery and its use of powerful themes. Take the opening of "The Highwayman" by Alfred Noyes:

The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty
trees,
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed on cloudy seas,
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
When the highwayman came riding—
Riding—riding—
The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn door....

The drama and the singing quality of these lines grab at a child's attention. The images—the moon, "a ghostly galleon," the road, "a ribbon of moonlight"—are a focus for the imagination. Like the old legends and tales that once were passed on to generations of children by their elders, poetry is a powerful oral tradition which few children can resist.

Poetry enthralls, but it also educates. It is a captivatingly useful art form. A poetry program can expand the language experience of children, train listening and speaking skills, and serve as a source of ideas for discussion.

In 1974, while teaching third and fourth grade in Berkeley, California, I developed a curriculum which utilized poetry for both "fun and profit." This program involved readings, discussions, practice sessions and recitals.

The most important part of a poetry program occurs in the ten to fifteen minutes each day that a teacher devotes to reading poems aloud. To give some idea of how such a period might be used, here is a sample week of poetry study. The focus in this

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case is on animals, both fantastic and ordinary.

The week begins, on Monday, with a reading of "The Magical Mouse" by Kenneth Patchen.

I am the magical mouse
I don't eat cheese
I eat sunsets
And the tops of trees....

This is read a second time and discussed briefly with the children. Any difficult vocabulary are written on the board and defined. On Tuesday the Patchen poem is read a third time and the children asked to try to recite as much as they can along with the teacher. Next, "The Mouse Whose Name is Time" by Robert Francis is introduced.

The Mouse whose name is Time
Is out of sound and sight.
He nibbles at the day
And nibbles at the night....

This is repeated a few times, discussed and so on. On Wednesday both poems are re-read. By this time the children may know most of "The Magical Mouse" and some of the Francis poem by heart. On Thursday "The Prayer of the Cat" by Carmen Bernos de Gasztold is read. Friday the cat poem is re-read and one or two more animal poems by deGasztold are added. With each new poem, vocabulary and content are discussed when appropriate and the children are encouraged to recite parts of the poems along with the teacher.

During this week of poetry, six to eight poems are introduced orally. The class does not see them on paper until they know the poems well by ear. Once that is so, copies are passed

out for the children to keep in individual poetry notebooks. They write vocabulary in a glossary at the back of this notebook. This basic week is repeated three or four times.

After about a month, each child prepares to present one of the poems in his notebook to the rest of the class. Early in the year this might involve simply reading the poem aloud at the front of the room. Later, the poem would be recited. During practice sessions before each reading or recital, the teacher has a chance to work with individuals or small groups on such skills as expression, speed, volume, and phrasing. Children can also help one another, by listening and commenting, "Too fast," "Too soft," and so on. The recital itself may at first be a scary experience and the teacher needs to be as encouraging and supportive as possible. Afterwards, the class can discuss what it did best and which areas need more work.

These three activities—listening to, discussing, and presenting poetry—continue throughout the year and make up the core of the poetry program. There are supplementary activities that can also be useful. For instance, choose a few children to act out a poem while you read it aloud. This is especially fun for younger ones, who will want to "do" the poem again and again until everyone has had a turn to play a part. Dramatizing ~~wavy line~~ forces children to listen carefully as they try to translate the words of the poem into suitable actions and expressions.

Another activity is a team game that is based on knowledge of

the authors, titles and content of the poetry read to the class. Teams are formed to compete in answering questions. "Who wrote 'The Mouse Whose Name is Time'?" "Name two poems by W.B. Yeats." "Give me the first four lines of Coleridge's 'The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner.'" This is a lively way of reinforcing what the children have learned about the poems and poets they have been hearing.

After the first few months, students can begin to bring in poems from home or the library, or can browse through poetry books at school. By reading poetry on their own, they begin to develop their own tastes and preferences.

At the end of the year a class will be acquainted with an anthology of 100-150 poems and will have read or recited for one another seven or eight times. They will have heard most of the poems anywhere from five to ten times each, during the teacher's readings, in practice sessions and recitals.

What effect does this repeated exposure to poetry have on elementary school students? Reading poems to children exposes them to a range and depth of language not found in their everyday lives. Over a period of time, this background will help to nurture a child's most basic skills: speech, reading and writing.

There are two ways in which poetry creates a language-rich environment in the classroom. First, it is an unusually good source of vocabulary. Serious poets choose their words carefully. They draw on a wider range of words than are found in conversation, on television, or in most children's books. Since poetry

is intended to be read aloud, its use of repetitions, rhythms and rhyming helps make these words stay in a child's mind. This "stickiness" of poetry words operates without much effort on the part of the student.

Second, poetry is a rich source of basic literary forms and techniques which are applicable to prose. The use of rhythm, phrasing and repetition fit this category. So do simile, metaphor, alliteration and personification, all found in their most refined state in poetry. Familiarity with these ways of using language can be valuable in children's prose writing and in their speech. They are the factors that give depth and power to language. They provide pictorial impact and a sense of drama.

Mechanical teaching of any of the literary forms isn't necessary at the elementary level. It is more effective to use poetry and other kinds of literature to make these forms a part of children's language by frequent example.

The use of recitals in a poetry program has specific benefits for children in addition to the good effects of regularly hearing poems read aloud. Recitals train the memory and give experience in speaking before a group. Both these skills are needed in adult life. Unfortunately, memorizing and reciting have been virtually eliminated from elementary education, along with other items included in the catch-all called "rote learning."

Reciting has been an unpleasant experience for many children.

Getting up in front of a group can have a paralysing effect on a person. But it doesn't have to be that way, if children are handled sensitively and given enough practice so that they have the chance to get good at it. The Suzuki violin program is an example of how children can be taught to handle performance from memory. Suzuki teachers give their students so many opportunities to play for others that the newness of being in front of a group wears off. The same effect can be seen in children after several recitals.

The key to this is the teacher who is consciously working to establish a supportive atmosphere in the classroom. Such a teacher encourages children to do their best but doesn't push anyone too fast or too far. Most important, the teacher encourages the children to help and applaud one another. Students who have been worked with in this way will prompt one another during recitals and even burst into applause after each child's turn. In an atmosphere of positive concern, children gain confidence and poise when reciting for their peers.

There are other pleasant spinoffs from learning poems by heart. Children find they have a common stock of familiar pieces, a kind of private collection. They love to repeat the poems informally with each other, on the playground or during a relaxed moment in the classroom. They like to recite together in small groups for the rest of the class or for other classes in the school.

Recitals can also be the focus of a healthy competition

between students. It is a matter of pride to have recited a very long poem. Some children never focus on length in this way, but others are inspired to great feats of memorization by the performances of their classmates. I have had children in third and fourth grade recite "The Highwayman," "The Wreck of the Hesperus," or four or five medium length poems at one sitting. "Horatius at the Bridge" is not the kind of poem I'd normally use in elementary school, but it was memorized by a fourth grader I had once, in secret so as to surprise us. When this boy's turn came, he recited for twenty minutes without stopping. Another time a second grader worked up a presentation of "The Walrus and the Carpenter" in which she recited and acted out the poem simultaneously. The recitals can, in this way, set the stage for real achievement and bring a moment of drama and excitement into the classroom.

Recitals are just one way of giving a child experience in speaking before a group. A very different type of speaking experience is discussion or debate. Poetry is a natural reservoir of material for discussion at any age level, including elementary school. Serious poetry is concerned with central human themes. Love, courage, beauty and loneliness are common ones. Relationships of all kinds are treated, as are various human values, aspirations and beliefs. These topics can be discussed thoughtfully by elementary school children. A class could compare, for example, the views of war taken in "In Flanders Fields," "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death." and "The Charge

of the Light Brigade." The concept of fame could be compared in "Ozymandias," "Buffalo Bill's Defunct," and "Casey at the Bat."

Another method of encouraging discussion is based on the element of purposeful ambiguity often found in poetry. In many works, something is either implied or left unsaid, providing a starting point for conversations on the meaning of the poem. With young children I sometimes use this poem:

In the grey evening
I see a long green serpent
With its tail in the dahlias.
It lies in loops across the grass
And drinks softly at the faucet.
I can hear it swallow.

Beatrice Janosco

A discussion of vocabulary and imagery leads the class to discover the subject—and thus the title—of the poem. It is, of course, "The Garden Hose."

Another good poem for elementary school is "Breakfast" by Jacques Prevert.

He put the coffee
In the cup
He put the milk
In the cup of coffee
He put the sugar
In the cafe au lait
With the coffee spoon
He stirred
He drank the cafe au lait
And he set down the cup
Without a word to me.

.

Who is speaking in this poem? Who stirs his coffee? What is happening between them?

Poetry can also lead to discussions of different historical periods, of unfamiliar cultures and traditions. W.B. Yeats

refers to both mythical and modern Ireland in his poetry, Pablo Neruda to the culture and social climate of Chile. Byron, Burns, Whitman and Basho all speak of what it was like to live in other times and places. The personal lives of poets also interest children. Emily Dickinson, a romantic recluse, and Wallace Stevens, a successful insurance executive, are examples of two with very different lifestyles.

Discussions along these different lines are stimulating. This does not imply that a "deep" analysis should be made of every poem. Far from it. Too much inspection gives the impression that a poem is nothing but a set of ideas, a puzzle to be taken apart piece by piece. Some poems are bits of fluff, lovely but insubstantial. Other poems are complex and difficult, but may be worth reading for the sake of their language alone. "Pied Beauty" by Gerald Manley Hopkins is an example of this.

Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-color as a brindled cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal, chestnut falls; finches-wings.
Landscape plotted and pieced-fold, fallow and plough;....

The sounds and rhythms of this poem can be left to play upon the ear.

With Kenneth Koch, I believe in reading serious, and therefore sometimes difficult, poetry to children. I find they stretch to meet the occasion. Also, certain poems have many levels of meaning. They may be interesting to a child on one level one year, and on an entirely different level two or three years later. Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner" is like that. It can be

read again and again as children grow into an understanding of its symbolism and religious significance.

Poetry is powerful stuff. Children absorb it the way they absorb language when they first learn to speak. Chances are it will still be with them when other facts and skills, and even the faces of the teachers who taught them, have long since faded from memory. There is nothing like hearing a snatch of verse as an adult and having a light go on and the words come rolling off your tongue. A poem is a kind of a gift that you can carry with you for a long time.

Following is a brief list of excellent anthologies which are geared toward elementary and junior high students.

Dawn and Dusk, Charles Causley. A variety of unusual poems.

Hollering Sun, Nancy Wood. Poems of the Indians.

Lean Out of the Window: An Anthology of Modern Poetry, Sara Hannum and G.E. Reed.

Of This World: A Poet's Life in Poetry, Richard Lewis. Haiku.

Piping Down the Valleys Wild: Poetry for the Young of All Ages, Nancy Larrick. Good for primary.

The Puffin Book of Magic Verse, Charles Causley. Everything to do with the supernatural.

Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle...And Other Modern Verse, Stephen Dunning, E. Lueders, H. Smith.

Room for Me and a Mountain Lion: Poetry of Open Space, Nancy Larrick.

The Singing and the Gold: Poems Translated from World Literature, Elinor Milnor, E.M. Parker.

Songs of the Dream People: Chants and Images from the Eskimos and Indians of North America, James Houston.

This Way Delight, Herbert Read. Traditional poetry.

A Tune Beyond Us, Myra Cohn Livingston. For middle school or junior high. World poetry in translation.

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